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William S. Haney II

Artistic Expression, Intimacy, and the Primal Holon: Sam Shepard's *Suicide in B-Flat* and *The Tooth of Crime*

Creative Transcendence

As the eccentric genius in *Suicide in B-Flat*, Niles tries to create a form of "visual music" that parallels Shepard's own pursuit of a polysensory theatrical form. Obsessed with liberating himself from the other, Niles seeks a purely aesthetic realm closed off from community and its intrusive voices. In the end, however, he has no choice but to reconcile himself with communal consciousness, partly because the other also inheres in the mind of the artist. Similarly, in *The Tooth of Crime*, Hoss, the king of rock music, finds his aesthetic realm under attack by an arrogant young rival, Crow. In their ultimate showdown, their weapon of choice is not guns or music but language. Like all artists, Niles and Hoss produce through creative transcendence, but they find that communicating with an audience also involves a dialogic relation between artist, art expression, and community. This dialogic relation, moreover, depends on the intimacy between the artist and his or her most inward self. As Michael Goldman notes, "*Intimacy* comes from the Latin superlative *intimus*, 'most inward,' and the impulse, the desire, perhaps the need to achieve a superlative degree of inwardness, has haunted European thought since who-knows-when" (2000, 77). As argued here, the degree of intimacy between self and other depends on the degree of intimacy with one's own self, which consists of two aspects: self as socially constructed identity, and self as one's "superlative degree of inwardness." In the two plays discussed here, Shepard was influenced by developments in American popular culture during the 1950s and '60s and wanted to create what he called "total" theater, or theater "where everything is present at once" (Gilman 1984, xvi)—a process,

as we shall see, that points toward an intimacy with the self as transcendental reality. Although credited with bringing a postmodern aesthetic to the American stage, Shepard, as I will argue, does not undermine transcendental awareness but rather contextualizes it within American culture through theater that attempts to create a new intimacy with consciousness itself.

Through an aesthetic symbiosis, Shepard's plays suggest a link between the social identity and transpersonal consciousness of the artist that forms the basis for intimacy. The intersubjective encounter between artist and audience, moreover, dramatizes mythic encounters with sacred experience. Antonin Artaud claims that, in Western theater, "the Word is everything, and there is no possibility of expression without it" (1958, 68). Asian theater, on the other hand, has "its own language" identified with the *mise en scène*, one constituted by "the visual and plastic materialization of speech" and by everything "signified on stage independently of speech" (68–69). The materialization of speech serves to restore and reinstate the metaphysical aspect of theater, "to reconcile it with the universe" (70) and "to rediscover the idea of the sacred" (Artaud 1988, 276). These sacred elements are not restricted to Asian theater but can also be found in Western theater. Shepard's plays rely on ordinary language and the Word but also produce some of the effects Artaud describes in Asian theater: taking the spectator (and performer) toward greater intimacy with the source and goal of art—namely, a transverbal, transpersonal experience paradoxically set within a cultural context. Theater does this by creating what Artaud calls "a void in thought" (1958, 71), a state of mind that begins with language and meaning and then goes beyond them through a shift in consciousness, as suggested by the creative enterprises of Niles and Hoss.

Shepard's theater achieves this in part through a process of transformations, an idea borrowed from Open Theater and expanded upon in plays like *Angel City*, *Suicide in B-Flat*, and *The Tooth of Crime*. As Richards Gilman explains, a transformation exercise involves "an improvised scene . . . in which after a while, and suddenly, the characters were asked to switch immediately to a new scene and therefore to wholly new characters. Among the aims (which were never wholly clear) were increased flexibility, insight into theatrical or acting clichés and more unified ensemble of playing" (1984, xvii). Such transformations, as I suggest, also involve the "decontingencing" of actor and spectator from the boundaries of ordinary language and identity, allowing for a greater intimacy with no-mind or a void in thought—which is one reason these transformations may seem "never wholly clear" in terms of logical discourse. Intimacy with our superlative degree of inwardness arguably forms the basis for all other forms of intimacy. It involves going beyond the duality of one's socially constructed

identity, beyond the intentional knowledge of the other distanced by a subject/object dualism, toward what Robert Forman calls "knowledge-by-identity" (1999, 109).

William James classified two kinds of knowledge or intentional experience, with the notion of intention entailing a subject's being aware of an object: "knowledge-about," which we gain by thinking about something, and "knowledge-by-acquaintance," which we gain through direct sensory experience (Barnard 1994, 123–34; Forman 1999, 109–27). Intimacy on these levels, however, always contains a spatial/temporal gap that prevents it from being superlative or complete. Forman refers to the "pure consciousness event" as a nonintentional experience or "knowledge-by-identity," in which there is no such gap or subject/object duality; "the subject knows something by virtue of being it. . . . It is a reflexive or self-referential form of knowing. I *know* my consciousness and I know that I am and have been conscious simply because I *am* it" (118; italics in original). As a truly intimate or immediate form of knowledge, nonintentional experience is thus devoid of the dualism of the subject-perceiving-object and subject-thinking-thought (125). Through intimacy with the superlative dimension of the self, moreover, the spectator intuits the difference between intentional consciousness, through which we identify with our roles and egos, and nonintentional consciousness, through which the self beyond qualities reflexively knows itself through "knowledge-by-identity." This nonintentional experience encompasses those defined by Western drama theorists as liminal, sublime, metaphysical, transluminating, holy, and transcendent, all of which are linked to the void in thought beyond the duality of subject and object, knower and known. Niles and Hoss, like the rest of us, have access to this level of knowledge only through a superlative degree of inwardness, induced in Shepard's theater through paradox and other devices that defamiliarize by attenuating the boundaries of thought.

The Primal Holon

Shepard's creative impulse or aesthetic vision of a total theater can be understood through the expressivist theory of the part/whole relationship in what Ken Wilber calls a "primal artistic holon" (1997, 114–16). *Holon* is a term coined by Arthur Koestler (1967) to describe an entity that is itself a whole but simultaneously part of a larger whole, in an infinite series, such that each entity is neither whole nor part, but a whole/part, or holon. In *Suicide in B-Flat* and *The Tooth of Crime*, Niles's and Hoss's creative impulses originate from a primal artistic holon, which bubbles up from the source of thought or the inner self. This source corresponds to transcendent

tal consciousness (*turiya*) or the transpersonal self (*atman*) in Shankara's Advaita (nondual) Vedanta (Chakrabarti 1971, 33; Deutsch 1973, 48–65), the “void of conceptions” in the *Maitri Upanishad* (*Maitri* 6:18–19; Hume 1921, 436), and Artaud's void in thought. When manifested through aesthetic form, the primal holon enters the artist's conscious mind, but not in a vacuum. Rather, it instantly engages the multiple contexts of human existence: the unconscious structures of the mind; our social roles, or who we seem to be; the structures of culture; and the global currents of the world about which we may not even be consciously aware. Paradoxically, as defined in nondual Vedanta, the transcendent primal whole, pure consciousness, being immanent within as well as transcendent, subsumes and, by entering, becomes part of the tangible holons of artists' expressions within their cultural contexts.

Throughout *Suicide in B-Flat*, Niles resists the intimacy of this holonic fusion with community in his attempt to achieve intimacy with the transpersonal self or the void of conceptions at the basis of aesthetic contemplation. Ultimately, though, his success as an artist compels him to accept the reality of social integration because intimacy with his primal artistic holon extends outward naturally to include creative expression and community. The intimacy between self and other, like that with one's socially constructed self, forms part of a larger whole constituted by the intimacy of the primal artistic holon, or the transpersonal self. Niles's encounter with this primal intimacy extends beyond his constructed identity to encompass the other on a transpersonal level. Hoss, on the other hand, has lost confidence in his ability to tap into his primal holon and becomes obsessed with the glamour of being an artist as defined merely by social conventions. As a result, his experience of intimacy remains fractured by the spatial/temporal gap of intentional consciousness.

As an unidentifiable emptiness, the primal holon as pure consciousness or a void in thought is knowable, at least initially, not indirectly through language or ideas, but only through the immediacy (or knowledge-by-identity) of transcognitive, noncontingent being after language and ideas have run their course. This most intimate form of knowledge beyond duality involves the self's knowing itself as a void of conceptions. Whatever third-person, objective theory we use to describe it, the subjective “experience” of a void of conceptions is transcultural, transpersonal, and thus largely the same in any theater, whether Asian or American. Although functionalists like Steven Katz (1978) and Daniel Dennett (1991) question the likelihood of unmediated experience, claiming that different types of mystical, Gnostic, or aesthetic experience do not point to a shareable transcendent source but merely reflect different cultural traditions, Shepard's work illustrates

that, while all contentful experiences are context related, it is not inconsistent to assume that contentless Gnostic or aesthetic experiences, although arising out of appropriate contexts, are nevertheless in and of themselves context free (see Almond 1990, 216). Differences in the expression of aesthetic experience, as Shepard uniquely demonstrates, reside only in the cultural contexts through which transpersonal, mythic encounters with superlative inwardness are evoked.

Dorrine Kondo (1990) and other postmodernists argue against the unmediated experience of the self as pure consciousness and purportedly demystify the so-called concept of self. As Shepard demonstrates, the deconstruction of a concept as part of a cultural context does not extend to knowledge defined as contentless experience, for the self in its context-free status is not a concept. To conflate self and concept (or thought) of self would imply that a concept is able to engage in thought and simultaneously be aware of itself in the act of thinking, a claim that holds only if we accept the poststructuralist definition of the subject as a cultural construct dispersed along a chain of signifiers (Lacan 1978) and subjugated by relations of race, gender, and power. It would also apply to the generally accepted definition of the posthuman self (Pepperell 2003; Hayles 1999). It becomes invalid, however, from an Advaitan perspective that includes the consideration of nonintentional pure consciousness, which, as a void of conceptions, is the source of concepts as well as the cultural paradigms that artists seek to amend through the primal artistic holon. In the basic ontological opposition between mind/body on the one hand and consciousness on the other (Samkhya Yoga; Pflueger 1998), the latter as the internal observer complements the former, which, as a “concept of self,” is a rhetorical construct based on the “Word as everything” typically associated with Western theater (Artaud 1958, 68).

Shepard questions the unified concept of self as a function of the mind and, in the process, opens up a theatrical space in which performers and spectators share an intimacy with the self as a function of consciousness without qualities (*turiya*) (see Deutsch 1973, 62–65). That we can know the internal observer only by being it and not by observing it (Deikman 1996, 355) precludes the possibility of infinite regress through which the self-reflexive subject becomes the object of another subject in an endless chain of subject/object duality. Jean-Paul Sartre, moreover, although without referring to *samadhi* or higher states of consciousness, says that, along with the awareness of objects in any intentional perception, there is a “non-positional consciousness of consciousness itself” (1956, lv). This reflexive “non-positional consciousness,” which is nonintentional, Sartre refers to as consciousness *pour-soi* (for itself), while the object of consciousness is *en-*

soi (in itself): "For if my consciousness were not consciousness of being consciousness of the table, it would then be consciousness of the table without consciousness of being so. In other words, it would be a consciousness ignorant of itself, an unconscious—which is absurd" (liv). For Sartre, "non-positional self consciousness" is beyond perception in that it is not itself an object of intentional knowledge knowable by the thinking mind, although it nevertheless ties perceptions together. Sartre makes the argument against infinite regress for "non-positional consciousness" through *reductio ad absurdum*.

This theory is comparable to the notion of defamiliarization in Russian formalism and to the alienation effect in Bertolt Brecht, which Tony Bennett describes as a way "to dislocate our habitual perception of the real world so as to make it the object of renewed attentiveness" (1979, 20). Significantly, as drama theorists from Diderot to Stanislavsky and Brecht have argued, the performer who holds an aesthetic distance between actor and performance is more convincing in conveying the desired emotion to the audience. The Brechtian practice of baring theatrical devices by presenting a diversity of visual frames has the effect of exposing monological perspectives as nothing more than competing ideologies (Brecht 1964). As Shepard demonstrates, what Brechtian theater attempts to achieve, with its narrative discontinuity, refusal of realism; and alienation effect (A-effect), ultimately is not a distinction between one imaginary unity of mind and another, but rather a distinction between mind and consciousness, knower and known. This distinction emerges when the Brechtian *gestus*—"a gesture, a word, an action" that exposes "the social attitudes encoded in the play-text" (Diamond 1988, 89)—succeeds in evoking the semiotically invisible; that is, when it directs attention from a self-dramatization to a self-shedding, thereby opening awareness to the coexistence of the silence and dynamism, boundaries and unboundedness characteristic of higher consciousness. Moreover, as Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe (2003) shows, immaterial consciousness cannot be *thought* about by the material intellect. As Niles and Hoss demonstrate, immaterial pure consciousness as expressed through the primal artistic holon exceeds the material mind, just as the actor in entering a dramatic text exceeds the text by rendering intimate for the audience the presence of a new life that the text does not exhaust (see Goldman 2000, 50).

Suicide in B-Flat

Holy Theater

In *Suicide in B-Flat*, a mystery play about a jazzman gone missing, Shepard

dramatizes the manifestation of the invisible identity of an avant-garde artist. Peter Brook says of holy theater:

All religions assert that the invisible is visible all the time . . . [but] it can only be seen given certain conditions. . . . To comprehend the visibility of the invisible is a life's work. Holy art is an aid to this, and so we arrive at a definition of holy theater. A holy theater not only presents the invisible but also offers conditions that make its perception possible. (1968, 56)

As in holy theater, the conditions of *Suicide in B-Flat* that render the invisible visible center on Niles's ontological crisis, his attempt to express in the pure form of jazz the silent or invisible dimension of music, which is transcendent to as well as immanent within jazz. Pushing against the familiar world, the play expands the awareness of character and spectator by voiding its content and thus allowing them to share a superlative degree of inwardness. As critics have pointed out (Roudané 2002; Wade 1996), Shepard often uses baffling and illogical dramatic content, the effect of which is the decontingencing of conventional awareness. The artist's hallucinatory states, the arbitrary character turns, the feverish monologues, the mass-cultural allusions, and the surrealistic antics of the play all contribute to a narrative line that moves back and forth between visible and invisible reality.

As the play opens, Louis and Pablo, two ineffectual detectives, investigate Niles's recent murder/suicide/disappearance. They conduct an eccentric investigation, with Louis theorizing and Pablo eventually agreeing that Niles seems not to have been murdered but rather to have orchestrated his own disappearance. But whether he was abducted or murdered or simply disappeared, Niles presents an enigma for the detectives, who in their conventional mindset cannot fathom a musician's unconventional sensibilities. Their investigation takes them to Niles's home, where they meet several musicians, whom they question about his disappearance. As the plot unfolds, Niles enters with his friend Paulette and is bothered by the outline of his body traced on the floor. Unseen by the other characters, Niles puts on various costumes, including a child's cowboy outfit, representing the conventional voices blocking his creativity by preventing access to his primal artistic holon. Although Niles worries about killing off the right voices, Paulette shoots these costumed figures in a symbolic attempt to exorcise the ghosts of convention that haunt him. The bullets and arrows she fires comically hit Louis and Pablo. Toward the end of the play, Petrone offers to take Niles home to confront the others and "clean the slate" (Shepard 1976, 153). Niles finally meets the detectives, but, unlike artists, they lack the desire for intimacy with the more abstract levels of human identity that

would connect them with a wider humanity (for further criticism of the play, see Mottram 1984; Hart 1987; Kleb 1989; McGhee 1993; Wilcox 1993; and Bottoms 1998).

In the play's epistemological context, the allusions to Dick Tracy and Raymond Chandler suggest that the range of detective work extends from popular culture and the whodunit motif to an investigation of something that surpasses computation and the conceptual mind. Louis and Pablo set up a distinction between themselves as public servants and Niles and his friends as artists, or between the outer and inner, the visible and invisible domains, which are not so much oppositional as complementary, the latter transcendent to but immanent within the former.

While Louis and Pablo conduct their investigation of Niles's apartment as the scene of the crime, Petrone comes in looking for Niles, blowing silently on his sax. In the ensuing conversation, Petrone refers to the Indian caste system and twice complains of being a "Low Dog" (Shepard 1976, 128, 131). This low regard implies that the artist often registers as an untouchable in American society, the apex of consumer capitalism. In the hierarchy of American values, the invisible as represented by Petrone's silent horn playing not only falls below the visible threshold of the material world but is misconstrued by the very detectives who are bent on revealing its secrets. Goldman comments on this non-affinity for human intimacy: While "fictional representations of intimate contact have become more and more detailed and explicit, not only in sexual matters but in the increasingly nuanced portrayal of consciousness and speech, the exchanges reported are increasingly unsatisfactory. . . . Certainly, from the point of view of drama the crisis of privacy is best understood as a crisis of intimacy" (2000, 79).

The conceptual, as symbolized by Pablo's master's degree, cannot render the intimacy of a void in thought, as symbolized by silent music, except by way of its own transcendence. The "immaterial cannot be thought about" (Meyer-Dinkgräfe 2003, 11), whether by fully or "half-baked intellectual notions" (Shepard 1976, 138). With his own crackpot ideas about artists, Pablo argues that Niles, being possessed by his own gift, turned to "religion, Superstition, Cultism" to have his demons tamed, with the result that his melodies have become boring (129), a theory that Petrone rightly rejects. As a conventional public servant, Pablo naively reverses Niles's true situation: namely, that of an artist trying to exorcise not his own gift but rather the demons that, as other voices, interfere with and obstruct this gift.

Laureen, another friend of Niles, wheels in a double acoustic bass fiddle while emitting a high-pitched scream. Playing the bass and talking to Louis and Pablo, she says, "This music has no room for politics" (133), an attitude that reflects Niles's attempt to separate art and community.

Throughout this scene, Louis struggles on the floor against killing himself with a knife, as if possessed by a demon. Louis's demon, however, is not the kind that Pablo describes as possessing Niles, but rather the kind that Niles, with Paulette's help, has been trying to exorcise by orchestrating the death of all the voices that belong to other people, including people like Louis and Pablo. As a Republican, Louis represents the political, conceptual, role-playing end of the identity spectrum, the culturally constructed aspect of the self like his partner Pablo, while the artists, especially Niles, who embodies the primal artistic holon, represent the self as a void of conceptions. At this point in the play, Niles and Paulette appear on stage under the spotlight, with the action alternating between them and the other characters. This alternation juxtaposes our role-playing identities in the visible world with the attempt to reach the invisible dimensions of the self. As explained below in the context of the levels of language and consciousness suggested in *The Tooth of Crime*, nonintentional consciousness or the witnessing self, as the groundless ground of the primal artistic holon, shares an intimate relationship with music as a unity of sound and form.

Other Voices

Although Niles has accepted Paulette's help to prevail over other voices obstructing his way to the invisible better self, he has qualms about her ruthless approach. Paulette justifies her method, however, arguing that the first victim, whose "whole face was blown off," was a mistake (Shepard 1976, 141), and that Niles wanted to find a way out anyway. The gruesome fate of the first victim not only helps to hide what happened to Niles from the detectives, who double as agents of social conformity, but also suggests that the roles of our socially constructed selves, our masks, do not represent our true identity. On the contrary, identifying with the face as mask not only conceals but also precludes intimacy with the invisible nature of the inner self underlying all social constructions, whether conventional or unconventional, avant-garde artist or public servant. Louis, who resists the loss of his constructed identity and its familiar contexts, says, "We've gotten ourselves into deep water here! Can't you feel it? Everything's crazy! I've got to get my bearings back. It feels like we're involved in something we'd be better off not knowing about. I never wanted to kill myself before" (138). Figuratively, killing himself implies an unconscious attempt to escape the saturated self (Gergen 1991) and move beyond conventional bearings toward the openness of nonintentional consciousness. In contrast to the detectives, Niles invites self-transformation and the wholeness of the self beyond qualities: "All these ones have to go because they're crowding me up. They've

gotten out of control. They've taken me over and there's no room left for me. They've stolen their way into my house when I wasn't looking" (Shepard 1976, 141). The other voices, including those of Pablo and Louis searching his house, have invaded his inner space, blocking access to his core identity as pure awareness.

Although Shepard sets up the condition for Niles's liberation, the bid for freedom is not without ambivalence. Niles has become attached to the other voices, the musicians he learned from and invited into his house, and now says, "I don't want to be lonely" (142). Patrick Hogan argues that the "absolute isolation of consciousness" leads to a sense of "unbearable solitude" (2004, 119), but this would apply only to ordinary waking consciousness, which involves the duality of subject and object, not to knowledge-by-identity of pure consciousness or the primal holon—the nonduality at the basis of all forms of intimacy. As Paulette says, the other voices block Niles's intimacy with his own creative intelligence: "You can't get to anything new. It's always the same. You're repeating yourself." Niles agrees: "It's not even myself I'm repeating. I'm repeating them. Over and over. They talk to me all the time. (*Suddenly screaming*) THERE'S VOICES COMING AT ME!" (Shepard 1976, 142). By donning a variety of costumes, like the cowboy outfit of Pecos Bill, King of Cowboys (whom Paulette will shoot with an arrow that hits Louis in the back), Niles undergoes the kind of transformation used in total theater. He switches suddenly from one character to another, with the hybridity of his social identity connoting an experience of being neither one nor the other, but an internal observer that witnesses both.

Dressed as Pecos Bill, Niles worries whether it's even possible to kill a legend. In saying, "You can't kill a myth!" (143), he recognizes the difficulty faced by an artist in going beyond conceptual content to the primal artistic holon. Pecos Bill's mythical hold on Niles makes him ambivalent and uncertain whether he wants to live or die. Paradoxically, the two go hand in hand, for death of the old self comforted by familiar voices implies rebirth of the nonpluralistic self as internal observer. Niles's anxiety of influence compels him finally to accept thanatos, the death of the familiar in exchange for a new, inchoate potentiality associated with aesthetic experience. Later, Paulette shoots Niles dressed in a new guise of black tails. This time the bullet finds Pablo, who, like Louis, represents the grand narrative of logical discourse and isolated constructed identity that Niles hopes to shed.

In the final scene, Petrone escorts Niles to his home to confront the others. Finding Pablo on the floor, Niles accuses him of groveling, but Pablo says, "I was on the verge of prayer" (154). Louis, on the other hand, says he lacks faith, claiming to "subscribe to no system of thought. I'm on

the verge of total madness" (154). Niles questions this statement: "The verge. Only the verge?" insisting there is no point in madness. Ironically, however, modern science has confirmed a long-suspected link between madness and creativity. As Neus Barrantes-Vidal says, "Substantial empirical work has shown that both creativity and the temperamental roots of psychoses have common features at a biological (e.g., high levels of dopamine), cognitive (e.g., a brain organization characterized by a weak inhibitory control that enables loosened or more flexible styles of mental activity), and emotional level (e.g., high openness to experience and phases of elation and intense enthusiasm)" (2004, 74–75). Like madness, creativity has its own neurophysiological condition, which corresponds to the "hypoaroused mystical states" that Forman describes as "marked by low levels of cognitive and physiological activity" (1999, 4). The ultimate hypoaroused state, according to Vedanta, is the pure consciousness event, as represented in Shepard's play through the primal artistic holon, which is also a means to the ultimate state of intimacy. Shepard's play suggests, therefore, that going off the deep end, while resembling madness, does not have to signify going mad per se; it can also denote the process of going beyond the duality of conscious content and its corresponding cultural contexts toward the unity of higher states of awareness with their own corresponding physiological conditions.

Although an artist would be more inclined to experience this process than the average person, anybody can (particularly a theater audience), as suggested by the fact that Niles is not the only one who appears to be mad. Pablo and Louis also behave insanely when on the verge of voiding thought, a process Niles describes in his final monologue:

Are you inside me or outside me? Am I inside you? Am I inside you right now? . . . Or am I just like you? Exactly like you? So exactly like you that we're exactly the same. So exactly that we're not even apart. Not even separate. Not even two things but just one. Only one. Indivisible. (Shepard 1976, 155)

From a postexperiential perspective, Niles is describing the contentless primal artistic holon, or what Yohanan Grintshpon would call the artist's better self or "Vedic otherness" (2003, 4); it is a boundaryless state of non-intentional awareness inherent within yet beyond all thought and creative expression. Leslie Wade (1996) notes that this passage more than any other in Shepard expresses the dialogic relation between artist, art expression, and community. It also suggests a fusion of the visible and invisible, mind and consciousness, artist and community. In the end, Niles accepts his social

responsibility by condemning murder: "Someone should pay for that," he says (Shepard 1976, 155), implying that cultural and primal holons are compatible as well as mutually interdependent.

With *Suicide in B-Flat*, Shepard illustrates that aesthetic experience, like Gnosticism, involves a movement of self-redemption induced by purifying one's inner being from the bondage of conscious content, including the fragmentary "concept of self" misconstrued as our essentialist identity. As H. Jonas writes, the spiritual being "does not belong to any objective scheme, is above the law, beyond good and evil, and a law unto himself in the power of his 'knowledge'" (1979, 334). The desire of an artist, like Niles, to be elsewhere, to be different, in part reflects what Harold Bloom calls the anxiety of influence, the drive to discover "what is oldest in one-self" (1982, 12), which, being the most inward or intimate, would also be the most universal. As a function of the primal artistic holon, whether Gnostic or aesthetic, this drive to "see earliest, as though no one had seen before us" (69), is dramatized by *Suicide in B-Flat* but only suggested by its trace in *The Tooth of Crime*.

The Tooth of Crime

Rock Musicians

The Tooth of Crime dramatizes an ostensible paradigm shift within rock culture through the rivalry between two rock musicians. From an optimistic viewpoint, a younger, more vital generation supersedes an older one preoccupied with the status quo. More pessimistically, the ruthless, mechanical power of ego displaces a humaneness weakened by complacency and loss of self. Given the constraints of drama, the final contest between Hoss, the established artist, and Crow, the brash contender, unfolds in a variety of "languages," both real and invented, through which each contestant vies to define himself as the superior artist. The Referee, who sees the showdown as no contest, announces Crow the winner because of his greater linguistic novelty and creative self-definition. Shooting the Referee in revenge, Hoss resigns himself to defeat and assumes the role of student of the younger man in the attempt to change his identity, at least on the surface. As the play suggests, however, any real development must originate from within, and Hoss, having failed in this regard, gives up "to the big power . . . all the way" (Shepard 1981, 249) and shoots himself in despair.

Shepard traces the genesis and decline of an artist who begins as a rebel but loses courage and ends up "respectable and safe" (215). As the play suggests, Hoss's early success and recognition derive from his connection with the primal artistic holon but begin to slip away once he allows the

accoutrements of success to distract him from the source of inspiration within. By succumbing to an obsession with turf wars and fame, he sets himself up as an easy target for an aspiring younger artist.

In act 1, Hoss says, "Something's lacking. I can't seem to get it up like the other kills. My heart's not in it" (222). Ironically, Hoss is more concerned with protecting his isolated persona than with keeping alive the unifying creative powers that helped construct this social identity in the first place. While claiming not to be worried about the "Gypsy" wanting to replace him, he nevertheless admits that he's intrigued: "His style is copping my patterns. I can feel it already and he's not even here yet. He's got a presence" (222). This interest in the Gypsy and in preserving his own dominance undermines his work and status as an artist. As Doc says, "You gotta stay disengaged, Hoss. The other way is fatal" (222). Significantly, Shepard reveals that the construction of social identity depends not only on the way others perceive us but also on the extent to which we stay in touch with the disengaged inner self, or nonintentional consciousness. For the artist, this represents the primal artistic holon, the translinguistic source of all artistic content manifested through contextual expressions. As *The Tooth of Crime* demonstrates, both artistic achievement and the constructedness of social identity are not purely social phenomena but are closely connected to the individual's ability to transcend the limits of rationalization and logical discourse.

That Hoss loses touch with his own being gradually undermines his confidence in himself both as an artist and as a public figure. Hoss says,

Ya know, you'd be O.K., Becky, if you had a self. So would I. Something to fall back on in a moment of doubt, or terror or even surprise. . . . Look at the Doc. A slave. An educated slave. Look at me. . . . I feel so trapped. So fucking unsure. Everything's a mystery. I had it all in the palm of my hand. The gold, the silver. I knew. I was sure. How could it slip away like that? (225)

The self he refers to has two aspects, not only for himself as an artist but also for Becky as a nonartist: the public, socially constructed self and the inner self as internal observer, the former a complex of conventional boundaries and the latter an infinite, holistic reservoir of creative intelligence. Openness to this reservoir, as the play suggests, determines how good we feel about ourselves and the world around us. Any blockage to creativity results in frustration, solipsism, and discontent, inevitably affecting not only our emotions but also our behavior. Even subtle imbalances in our behavior determine how we are perceived by others, as illustrated by the consequences of Hoss's inability to disengage. Social identity reflects our

inner sense of self, which in turn depends on how intimate we are with the source of our own creative intelligence. For Shepard, this source is available to all, artist and nonartist alike.

When Hoss exits momentarily at the beginning of act 2, Crow imitates his walk and sits in his chair, as if tasting victory in advance. When the contest begins, Hoss finds Crow's aggressive ingenuity with language disconcerting. As Crow spins out new, staccato rhythms, Hoss reverts to the established languages of older styles—western cowboy, 1920s gangster, voodoo—and is then surprised when Crow uses ordinary English: "There! Why'd you slip just then? Why'd you suddenly talk like a person? You're into a wider scope than I thought" (230). As the play suggests, Crow's agility at switching back and forth between everyday language and creative expressions derives from his connection with the primal artistic holon, a skill Hoss has long since forfeited by selling out for riches and fame. Hoss intuits this loss when he says, "This is really weird, me learnin' from you. I mean I can't believe myself admitting it" (229). After their initial encounter, Hoss exits and Crow sings his "Crow's Song," with the refrain, "But I believe in my mask—The man I made up is me / And I believe in my dance—And my destiny" (232–33). Although referring to his mask, Crow succeeds in projecting a winning social identity because of his greater intimacy with and ability to invoke the creative power of his inner being, as illustrated by his figurative language, originality, cognitive power, and exuberance of diction. In the middle of round one, Hoss, feeling outgunned by Crow's verbal ingenuity and confused by his violation of verisimilitude, complains, "You can't do that!" (236).

Crow's language takes liberty with reference, creating its own imaginary context that belies Hoss's past. "He [Crow] was pickin' at a past that ain't even there. Fantasy marks. Like a dog scratchin' on ice. I can play that way if I was a liar. The reason I brought you [the Referee] into this match was to keep everything above the table. How can you give points to a liar?" (237). Although at one time he was perhaps equally innovative in achieving his own status as near-mythic hero, Hoss now clings to what he considers traditional realism, while Crow emerges as the radical innovator who shifts the ground in the repetitive cycle of modernist change. But, like Shepard, Crow is not a deconstructive postmodernist. Rather than undermining transcendence, the battle between the rival musicians reveals that the language of the more creative artist has a disturbingly defamiliarizing effect on his opponent because of its closer affinity with transcendence or presence. Derrida, as we know, deconstructively argues with regard to the trace that "the possibility of the reference to the other, and thus of radical alterity and heterogeneity, of difference," is always already inscribed "in the presence of

the present that it dis-joins" (1994, 75). While Crow's nonreferential style may resemble poststructuralist self-referral, however, it does not undermine transcendental awareness so much as recontextualize it within American culture. Hoss doesn't see it that way, of course, having lost his former aptitude for transcendence through the distraction of worldly success.

Language and Presence

For Derrida, *transcendence* refers only to the relation between inside and outside, with the outside being transcendent merely to the inside, rather than being independent of thoughts like nonintentional consciousness as the internal observer. From an Advaitan perspective, on the other hand, the other in its radical alterity always already encompasses two dimensions: duality and singularity, mind and consciousness, with the latter dimension both immanent within the former as well as transcendent. Crow and Hoss, therefore, while in some ways radically other on the outside, can be understood as sharing a oneness on the inside, in terms of their social identity as artists and their affinity for aesthetic experience. Through the self-referral indeterminacy of his jiving wordplay, Crow invokes the transcendent unity of the primal artistic holon that Hoss possesses and, at one time, could reach, but has now enshrouded with the familiar duality of the material world that obstructs his view. This materialism has the effect of directing Hoss's awareness outward through the five senses rather than inward toward the unity of nonintentional consciousness. In the context of the play, Crow's figurative language, which attends more to the signifier than to the signified, as in ordinary, nonpoetic language, produces an alienating and even mystical effect.

Explaining literature using the terms of cognitive science, Reuven Tsur argues that wit and mysticism, when used as artistic devices, produce more than the merely conceptual effect of formulating mystic or religious ideas; they also "somehow seem to reach the less rational layers of the mind by some drastic interference with the smooth functioning of the cognitive system, or by some quite smooth regression from 'ordinary consciousness' to some 'altered state of consciousness'" (2004, 60). Crow's songs and verbal dueling, while perhaps not as radical today as when the play was first performed, derive from and have the practical effect of moving the mind toward an altered state of consciousness. They not only display and evoke knowledge-about and knowledge-by-acquaintance but also provide a taste of knowledge-by-identity. Tsur claims that even "dead" ornaments, when revived through poetic manipulation, can to various degrees create an experience of alienation (from the familiar world), ecstasy, and transcendence.

In the case of Crow, the effect depends on whether we consider Hoss from within the play or focus on today's audience, for whom his style of verbal play may now seem all too familiar.

Shepard's notion of the influence of an artist, however, is supported by Tsur's study of the effects of mysticism and metaphysical poetry. The cognitive scientist Steven Katz, moreover, explains how the shock of paradoxes can take the mind beyond rationalizations and logical certitudes toward a superlative degree of inwardness:

Such linguistic ploys exist in many places throughout the world, usually connected with the conscious construction of paradoxes whose necessary violations of the laws of logic are intended to shock, even shatter, the standard epistemic security of "disciples," thereby allowing them to move to new and higher forms of insight/knowledge. That is, mystics in certain circumstances know that they are uttering nonsensical propositions, but in so doing they intend, among other things, to force the hearers of such propositions to consider who they are—to locate themselves vis-à-vis normal versus transcendental "reality." (1992, 7–8)

Crow's "jive rhythms" involve, at least for Hoss and for Shepard's original audience, the construction of paradoxes that attenuate the boundaries of thought. This form of transcendence takes the performer and audience beyond Derrida's inside/outside duality by suggesting the unity of a void of conceptions. Unable to cope with Crow's nonrepresentational language, which forces one to abandon the ordinary levels of mind, Hoss feels confused and insecure.

Indian language theory, first expounded in the Vedas and developed by the fifth-century grammarian Bhartrhari, posits that ordinary waking and transcendental pure consciousness yield the experience of different levels of language. In ordinary waking consciousness, language appears as a temporal sequence and consists of two aspects: *vaikhari* (outward speech) and *madhyama* (inward speech or thought). In nonintentional pure consciousness, on the other hand, the two higher levels of *pashyanti* and *para* extend beyond ordinary experience (Coward 1980, 126–37). These higher levels, which are unavailable to the ordinary mind, consist of a unity of sound and meaning without temporal sequence; all phenomenal differentiations disappear and meaning is apprehended as a noumenal whole. In ordinary waking consciousness, *vaikhari* and *madhyama* give only a partial expression of a unified meaning or "transcendental signified" available on the higher levels of language. As suggested in *The Tooth of Crime*, these higher levels, which transcend the spatializing/temporalizing movement of difference that de-

pends on a space/time continuum, are analogous to Crow's musical speech. This language involves a shift from a referential toward a nonreferential or transcendent reality, which has a defamiliarizing and disorientating effect on Hoss, now stagnated on the isolating ordinary level of language and consciousness. As we have seen, *Suicide in B-Flat* also reveals the intimate relationship between self and music. Niles's musical gift and Petrone's silent compositions on the sax suggest the invisible unity of sound and meaning—the noumenal whole underlying the temporal sequence of phenomenal differentiations. Indeed, as argued here, nonintentional consciousness as the primal artistic holon constitutes the unified source of poetry and music.

Shepard's dramatic use of open, organic language and music was influenced not only by European absurdists, such as Artaud and Pirandello, but also by American culture in the 1960s and '70s, a time of liberation from normative values and academic formalism. As Matthew Roudané puts it, "Shepard learned from the free associative forms of Beat poetry. He embraced the improvisational aspects of a free language, of a word-play liberated from rigid structures of meter and logical coherence. The poetry of Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Allen Ginsberg appealed to his verbal imagination, as did Jack Kerouac's 'oceanic' prose in *On the Road* (1957)" (2002, 4). *Suicide in B-Flat* and *The Tooth of Crime* have their roots both in American Beat culture and, more significant, in the transcultural freedom associated with the internal observer. Like those of other artists, Shepard's improvisational forms arise out of his access to deeper levels of language and consciousness. Not only the Beats but also many others in the 1960s and '70s participated in widening the gap between straight and outlaw culture, particularly through the visionary possibilities inspired by the use of hallucinogenic drugs such as psilocybin, peyote, and LSD. Drug use also precipitated a transitory experience of the intimacy associated with the unity of pure consciousness as the source of creative intelligence. This intimacy underlies the use of autobiographical forms and the exploration of alternative traditions, such as Zen and Tantric Buddhism, Hinduism, and erotic mysticism. William S. Burroughs thought of the narrative as a journey into a fantasy world where we discover the real. He considered his novel *Naked Lunch* (1959) to be a holy text, the embodiment of the Word through which the reader can achieve a sacred experience.

The Word as a manifestation of higher levels of language, unavailable in the temporality of ordinary waking consciousness and its duality of subject and object, is cognized through a process in which meaning and consciousness begin to fuse, as in the case of aesthetic experience, suggested by Shepard's plays. In light of this distinction, Derrida and other poststructur-

alists operating on the level of mind attempt to deconstruct the absolute truth value of that which turns out to be merely a relative manifestation of the absolute (*vaikhari* and *madhyama*) rather than the absolute itself (*para*). According to Advaita (nondual) Vedanta, because the latter is unavailable to the temporal mind alone, strictly speaking it can neither be deconstructed nor legitimated by it. This distinction makes it essential for artists, like Hoss and Crow, to keep open their connection with nonintentional consciousness, the basis of all intimacy. Otherwise, instead of achieving the status of a mythic hero with whom all can identify, they will merely lose their grounding and point of reference. As Tsur says, "Orientation is the ability to locate oneself in one's environment with reference to time, place, and people" (2004, 69). Crow's jive shatters Hoss's "standard epistemic security," as if Crow were the master and Hoss the disciple brought face-to-face with the specter of his lost transcendental reality—the only point of reference that never changes and thus constitutes the source of all stability. After the third round of their duel, which the Referee calls a TKO, Hoss tries to redeem himself by imploring Crow, "You could teach me. I could pick it up fast" (Shepard 1981, 241).

But the cost is high, the new master unscrupulous, and Hoss not only disoriented on all levels of language and mind but also dispossessed when Crow takes everything as the victor's spoils: "O.K. This is what I want. All your turf from Phoenix to San Berdoo clear up to Napa Valley and back. The whole shot. That's what I want" (242). Hoss fails to exploit his disorientation for the sake of greater knowledge/insight—the universal intimacy of the void of conceptions: "This isn't the way it's supposed to happen. Why do you wanna be like me anyway. Look at me. Everything was going good. . . . Now I'm outa' control. . . . Nothin' takes a solid form. Nothin' sure and final. Where do I stand! Where the fuck do I stand!" (243). Instead of reorienting himself to transcendent reality through the primal artistic holon by reviving his music at its source in the self as witness, Hoss yearns for his "normal" world of stardom, which he tries to regain by imitating Crow. "Just help me into the style. I'll develop my own image. I'm an original man. A one and only. I just need some help" (241). As viewed from the outside, Hoss thinks of himself as an original man, but the inner source of that originality, the true basis for its preservation, has been overshadowed. Feeling trapped and defeated, Hoss tries to refashion himself by imitating Crow, who asks, "Are you blank now?" (246). Going blank implies not only emptying out the contents of one's mind that sustain one's socially constructed identity but also attaining pure consciousness as the void of conceptions. What Crow explicitly intends, however, is that Hoss merely blank out his failed social identity in the vain hope that he can more

readily assume the ruthless role of "A true Killer" (247) like Crow himself. Yet Hoss, having once tasted the true emptiness of nonintentional pure consciousness, soon realizes that Crow's manipulating tactics have led him down a soul-destroying path: "It ain't me! IT AIN'T ME!" (247).

In a vain attempt to undermine Crow's self-confidence, Hoss attacks his image as an artist, calling him "pitiful," a description Crow rejects (248–49). Ultimately, however, the play suggests that Crow's victory will be just as fleeting as Hoss's, given that his attention has switched from the primal artistic holon to the accoutrements of his worldly status he has tried to enhance by defeating Hoss. Crow might be a "master adapter," but adapting to the socially constructed identity of a preexisting situation cannot compete with the transformative powers of genuine innovation derived through the internal observer. Having reached what he perceives to be the end of the road, Hoss takes his own life, in effect suggesting a transcendence through death that he failed to sustain in life. Although Crow says that Hoss didn't "answer to no name but loser" (250), the subtext of the play indicts both artists for getting distracted from the internal observer as the core of creative intelligence, and society for allowing money to dictate our values and detach us from our true self-identity.

What Shepard's theater makes visible is not just the material, one-dimensional multiplicity of difference but the radical alterity of pure consciousness on the intimate level of knowledge-by-identity. Niles and Hoss, like Derrida's trace and other aconceptual concepts, demonstrate that, while presence as the ultimate intimacy is inaccessible to the thinking mind, it can still be pointed to by way of suggestion, either through the theater's unsayable secret or through the power of figurative language to allow or make come a nonordinary level of language and consciousness—the essence of aesthetic experience available not only to artists and musicians but to everybody. David DeRose claims, "In the end, Shepard's writings suggest that the rock messiah is an unattainable ideal, the pursuit of which leads to self-delusion or self-destruction" (2002, 230). What this implies is that no rock star or any other artist can become a mythic hero unless he or she keeps an open channel to the primal artistic holon. An artist does not attain the status of rock messiah deliberately, as in the case of a socially constructed identity, but only as an epiphenomenon of the experience of transcendental reality. While Hoss tries to preserve his social identity as an artist without regard for its foundation in higher consciousness, Niles wants to divest himself of the conventional voices that block his access to pure consciousness as the source of creativity.

Through a symbiosis of the material and immaterial, mind and con-

sciousness, self and community, *Suicide in B-Flat* and *The Tooth of Crime* dramatize the subtle presence/absence of a contentless realm of experience that underlies all intimacy and all forms of expression, whether social or artistic. In setting up the conditions that make perception of the invisible possible, these plays also reveal the risks of neglecting this possibility. However defamiliarizing or disorienting the emergence of the invisible may seem, this process occurs spontaneously and even joyfully for anyone who cares to cultivate an intimate relationship with pure awareness. Because intimacy as defined in association with higher consciousness brings involvement along with nonattachment, it gives one the critical perspective of an outsider in the sense that one is *in* while simultaneously not *of* the context being critically observed. Paradoxically, this unbounded intimacy underlies the Brechtian A-effect, the Sartrean nonpositional consciousness, the primal artistic holon, and all other forms of critical distance to conceptual boundaries, thereby allowing one to discover ever new truths previously hidden, and to create ever new human possibilities.

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